



Prosser, D. (2018). Marconi Proposes: Why it's time to rethink the birth of the BBC. *Media History*.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13688804.2018.1525290>

Peer reviewed version

License (if available):
Other

Link to published version (if available):
[10.1080/13688804.2018.1525290](https://doi.org/10.1080/13688804.2018.1525290)

[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](#)
PDF-document

This is the accepted author manuscript (AAM). The final published version (version of record) is available online via [insert publisher name] at [insert hyperlink]. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available:
<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/ebr-terms/>

Marconi Proposes: Why it's time to rethink the birth of the BBC

David Prosser
University of Bristol

Published in [*Media History*](#) August 2018

Abstract

New evidence requires us to revise our understanding of the birth of British broadcasting in 1922. The Post Office deployed misleading ideas about the development of commercial broadcasting in America and cemented the case for public funding and a ban on advertising. However, the idea for a single broadcaster came not from the Postmaster General but from the Marconi Company at a key meeting in May 1922 for which a transcript has emerged. It shows that ideas about public service broadcasting predate John Reith's arrival by several months. This meeting laid the foundations of broadcasting in Britain, envisaging a single broadcaster operating at arms-length from government, providing a 'public service' with national content shared between regional stations, funded by a licence fee. We can identify the exact moment the BBC was conceived. It was not the Post Office that proposed the BBC, but Godfrey Isaacs, the managing director of Marconi.

Acknowledgements

This article is the result of time spent undertaking postgraduate research at the University of Bristol whilst on a career break from the BBC. I am grateful to Professor Simon J. Potter for his encouragement and guidance.

I: Introduction

In light of new evidence, it is necessary to revise several elements of our understanding of the birth of British broadcasting in 1922. The prevailing view suggests that for reasons of administrative ease and to avoid the 'chaos' across the Atlantic, the Postmaster General 'solved the problems of radio interference by persuading rival manufacturers to invest jointly in one small and initially speculative broadcasting station'.¹ It was then left to John Reith, the

BBC's first general manager to build the company and develop the notion of public service broadcasting in Britain. I make three arguments in this paper. Firstly, the Post Office deployed misleading ideas about the development of commercial broadcasting in America, either purposely or unwittingly, and in doing so cemented the case for public funding and a ban on advertising. Secondly, the idea for a single broadcaster came not from the Postmaster General but from the Marconi Company at a key meeting in May 1922. (For almost a century it was thought no account of this meeting existed but a transcript has emerged in the Royal Mail archives.²) Asa Briggs titles this chapter of his history 'The Post Office Proposes', but the Marconi Company's suggestion went far further than the co-operation around wavelengths that the Post Office had in mind.³ Thirdly, the transcript shows that ideas about 'public service broadcasting' predate Reith's arrival by several months.

II: American 'chaos' revisited

American broadcasting was still very much in its infancy in the spring of 1922 when key decisions regarding British broadcasting were made. Radio had previously been seen primarily in terms of wireless telegraphy, most useful for ship-to-shore, but by 1920, wireless telephony – the transmission of sound – was the subject of experiments on both sides of the Atlantic. A few hundred wireless enthusiasts heard Dame Nellie Melba sing from Marconi's studio in Chelmsford in June 1920, but the Post Office, disapproving of such frivolity according to Guglielmo Marconi's authorised biography, halted all experimental broadcasts in Britain.⁴ When the Post Office official most associated with the birth of broadcasting, Assistant Secretary L. J. Brown, visited America to attend an arms conference, he wrote home in February 1922 'the opinion is growing here that broadcasting is the main sphere of wireless in the future'. Westinghouse was producing radio sets at the rate of 25,000 per month, priced between 30 to 150 dollars, and, according to Brown, could not keep up with demand.

The sending stations broadcast on 360 metres. They probably interfere to some extent with ship-and-shore work, and they certainly tend to interfere with one another. I heard a program from one of them last Sunday at Dr. Frank B. Jewett's

home, by means of his boy's receiving set. Both speech and music were quite clear.⁵

Jewett was a noted AT&T engineer who would become president of the American Institute of Electrical Engineers in 1922. That it was his son's equipment is significant: for many the technology was still regarded somewhat as a toy. The inaugural edition of an American magazine, *Radio Broadcast*, in May 1922 would feature a father and son wearing headphones on its front cover. That Brown was 'certain' stations interfered with one another, yet what he heard was 'quite clear', remains a puzzle. Pressed on this question in later evidence to a parliamentary committee, Brown admitted 'chaos' may have been an exaggeration but 'experts' had assured him 'there was a good deal'.⁶

The experts Brown spoke to would have been anxious at the pace of developments, yet the allocation of spectrum for broadcasting wasn't yet assured. Commerce Secretary Herbert Hoover was fighting (and losing) a legal battle with the Intercity Radio Company, which had opened a wireless telegraphy station in December 1920 in New York City, not for broadcasting purposes but to transmit point-to-point communications. The *New York Times*, U.S. Navy and others complained that their own communications were being interfered with. In May 1921, the Commerce Department revoked Intercity's licence. Intercity sued and in November the court ordered Hoover to renew its licence.⁷ Painfully aware that his powers to refuse licences were weak under the US Radio Act of 1912, Hoover called his first radio conference in Washington DC from 27 February to 2 March 1922 to ask for industry advice on regulation.⁸

Hoover's intention to claim the new technology for broadcasting is evident from his opening speech to the conference. Transcribed by Brown, it would have a significant impact on the development of broadcasting policy in Britain:

I think it will be agreed at the outset that the use of the radio telephone for communication between single individuals as in the case of the ordinary telephone is a perfectly hopeless notion. Obviously if 10,000,000 telephone subscribers are crying through the air for their mates they will never make a juncture, the ether will be filled with frantic chaos, with no communication of any

kind possible. In other words, the wireless has one definite field, and that is for the spread of certain pre-determined material of public interest from central stations. This material must be limited to news, to education, to entertainment, and the communication of such commercial matters as are of importance to large groups of the community at the same time. It is, therefore, primarily a question of broadcasting, and it becomes of primary public interest to say who is to do the broadcasting, under what circumstances, and with what type of material. It is inconceivable that we should allow so great a possibility for service, for news, for entertainment, for education, and for vital commercial purposes, to be drowned in advertising chatter, or to be used for commercial purposes that can be quite well served by our other means of communication.⁹

Stephen Phipps has suggested a useful study could identify the origin of the word 'chaos' and phrase 'order out of chaos' which held special meaning for the development of industry regulation in the US.¹⁰ Hoover's expression 'frantic chaos' appears to be the first use of the word but he employs it in a very specific context: to dispel the notion that radio could be best used as a telephone. This point has been misunderstood by some historians. Jean Seaton writes that

'an epidemic of broadcasting was raging'. Thousands of American companies had started broadcasting and President Hoover had demanded central control over the new technology, claiming that it was as if '10,000 [sic] telephone subscribers were crying through the air for their mates'. As a result of interference, Hoover declared, 'the ether will be filled with frantic chaos'.¹¹

There is some confusion as to how many broadcasting stations, as we might understand them today, were operating by the spring of 1922, though it is unlikely that it was 'thousands'. In America, licences were required for transmitters only (a crucial distinction from Britain) and Briggs states the US Department of Commerce had granted more than 399 by May 1922, and 572 by the end of the year.¹² An official publication listed 378 government and commercial stations as of 30 June.¹³ Many of these would have been operated by colleges or newspapers as well as wireless manufacturers, and would have broadcast for a short time each day or

week. There were also an estimated 14,000 amateur radio operators and in January 1922 the Department of Commerce ordered them to stop sending signals, but 'so-called interference by amateur radio operators was exaggerated'.¹⁴ The real problem was that early radio transmitters could not adhere to a wavelength with any degree of accuracy and receivers similarly tended to drift. The first issue of *Radio Broadcast* in May 1922 (published several weeks after Brown's visit) counted 'altogether, according to present available information ... more than twenty stations which broadcast extensively'.¹⁵ This passage from the journal's first article is illuminating:

You turn on your switches and wait – if you hear nothing you conclude the transmitting station has not started so you wait and wonder what is going to be sent out when it does start. It may be a selection from 'Aida', wonderfully executed, or it may be nothing but a scratchy, cracked, phonograph record... You are not alone in this game of watching and waiting – there are hundreds of thousands of others, and soon there will be millions of people doing the same thing.¹⁶

'Watching and waiting' does not suggest the editor of *Radio Broadcast* felt the airwaves were overly congested by this time. In New York, where 15 stations operated on a single frequency, an agreement was reached in July 1922 for allocation of time.¹⁷ Reports of actual interference between stations would not appear until October (by which time negotiations to establish the BBC were concluded), and then only on one occasion in New York.¹⁸

Turning now to the question of on-air advertising in the US, the sources suggest there was little or none by the spring of 1922. *Radio Broadcast* informed its readers in May that

on the Pacific coast a number of commercial houses pay the costs of a broadcasting station for the advertising they receive, although the advertising consists of little more than the mention of their names.¹⁹

In February 1922, the American Telephone and Telegraph Company (AT&T) announced an experiment in 'toll broadcasting'. It would sell slots on a new radio station in New York, the

buyer providing a suitable programme in return for an on-air credit.²⁰ The idea was slow to catch on, and the first programme, a ten-minute slot for a real estate company, aired on WEAF on 28 August 1922. The first sponsored musical programme, from Gimbel Brothers' department store, would go out in February the following year.²¹ Most reporting during 1922 highlights the *future* potential use of advertising, generally negatively. Another magazine, *The Radio Dealer*, wrote in April:

Any attempt to put over 'advertising stunts' should be nipped in the bud now and quickly.... It is true 'feelers' are already out. Lines of inquiry are being developed by certain 'interests' [probably a reference to AT&T's toll experiment], but the first result of a real attempt by advertisers to control the air will be and should be met with firm resistance.²²

Given the passion expressed here, one would expect, if advertising were already a noticeable feature on American radio in the spring of 1922, the *Radio Dealer* would have said so. Hoover told the first radio conference it was 'inconceivable that we should allow so great a possibility for service... to be drowned in advertising chatter': he did not say that it was already happening. Erik Barnouw describes the discussion of advertising at the conference as 'curious in the light of later developments. The idea of "ether advertising" was mentioned but with disfavour'. Since the danger of this drowning in advertising seemed

remote - inconceivable, according to Hoover - his remark caused little comment at the time. The prevailing mood was in any case, one of excitement and anticipation.²³

The conference recommended an outright ban on 'direct' advertising citing a shortage of wavelengths; a decision Brown would highlight upon his return to London. But he failed to communicate another, and ultimately for American broadcasting, more significant development. Toll broadcasting, defined as 'broadcasting where charge is made for the use of the transmitting station'²⁴ was to be

be permitted to develop naturally under close observation, with the

understanding that its character; quality, and value to the public will be considered in determining its privileges under future regulations.²⁵

The sponsor's name could be used alongside the station call sign 'subject to such regulations as the Secretary of Commerce may impose'.²⁶

III: Development of policy in the UK

Brown returned to London in March 1922, where he discovered the Postmaster General faced mounting pressure from manufacturers and amateur enthusiasts to allow regular broadcasting. A petition in December 1921 from the nation's wireless societies noted that the French authorities were already allowing the transmission of speech and music, along with time signals from the Eiffel Tower, and voiced a patriotic indignation that England

where Wireless Telegraphy originated and whose Greenwich time is the time of the world, but who sends out no wireless time signals, should again fall behind other countries be (sic) reason of failure to move with events.²⁷

In February 1922, the Post Office responded by allowing a half-hour weekly broadcast incorporating speech and music from Marconi's Chelmsford works (in fact a hut in Writtle a few miles away), under the call sign 2MT. Led by bright, young engineers like Peter Eckersley (later to become the first Chief Engineer of the BBC) these limited broadcasts were by their nature experimental, initially involving 'telegraphic signals for calibration purposes' followed by gramophone records.²⁸ But 2MT's efforts to enliven the broadcasts with songs, plays and Eckersley's irreverent skill behind the microphone showed the potential for the new medium. From 11 May, Marconi was granted a licence to run a second experimental station in London, 2LO, for an hour each day but initially with onerous restrictions prohibiting music and a requirement for the 'operator' to pause every seven minutes and listen in case there were instructions not to proceed.²⁹ What manufacturers wanted were regular, uninterrupted entertainment programmes to launch the new industry. By April, twenty-four firms had

applied for transmitting licences.³⁰ Coase says Brown was also confronted with applications from some of the 'large department stores' though there is no archival evidence of this.³¹ Brown himself does not mention them, only applications from 'certain wireless manufacturing firms for permission to broadcast programmes of music, etc. for the purpose of promoting the sale of their apparatus'.³²

Brown's willingness to employ 'American chaos' to limit options is evident from the first statement by Frederick Kellaway, Postmaster General, in the House of Commons in early April.

It would be impossible to have a large number of firms broadcasting. It would result in a sort of chaos, only in a more aggravated form than that which arises in the United States, and which has compelled the United States, or the Department over which Mr. Hoover presides, and which is responsible for broadcasting, to do what we are now doing at the beginning, that is, to lay down very drastic regulations indeed for the control of wireless broadcasting.³³

In early April, the Wireless Sub-committee of the Imperial Communications Committee, which included representatives of the armed forces, endorsed a plan for broadcasting in eight British cities initially on one wavelength. Brown, identified only as a 'high official of the Post Office' who had recently returned from making a 'careful study' of conditions in the United States, briefed *The Times* that wireless has become a 'perfect craze' with 'a great deal of mutual interference between stations... the [U.S.] Government has had to appoint a committee with a view to imposing restrictions'.³⁴ The article extensively quoted Hoover's speech to the Washington radio conference, including his prediction of 'frantic chaos' (though faithfully, in the context of point-to-point communications). The use of so valuable a service for advertising was reported as 'inconceivable', however the toll experiment in the US is not mentioned at all. Within three weeks, the Wireless Sub-committee agreed that broadcasting should be allowed between the wavelengths 350-425 metres from 5pm – 11pm weekdays and all day on Sundays and the decision was made that advertising should be prohibited.³⁵

Administrative ease certainly played a major role in the British government's, or perhaps more accurately the Post Office's, subsequent decision to restrict transmitter licences to wireless manufacturers. British newspapers viewed developments warily in the spring of 1922 but were not prepared themselves to invest in broadcasting. The *Daily Mail*, which had sponsored the Nellie Melba broadcast of 1920, mooted a joint scheme with Marconi, but the latter showed little interest.³⁶ The following year the *Daily Express* would apply for a licence, but mainly to express its opposition to the BBC's monopoly. Department stores, even if they could acquire the technical ability, would want to advertise their wares and that had been expressly ruled out. Only the manufacturers had the technical ability, the money and the incentive to move quickly. In early May, Kellaway announced that a 'limited number of radio telephone broadcasting stations' were to be permitted, but this time added that only 'bona fide manufacturers of wireless apparatus' were invited to

come together at the Post Office and to co-operate so that an efficient service may be rendered and that there may be no danger of monopoly and that each service shall not be interfering with the efficient working of the other.³⁷

Monopoly in this context meant 'commercial monopoly' and alludes to Marconi's market dominance. The logic was hammered home in two articles in *The Times* by Sir Henry Norman, MP, the chair of the sub-committee. Warning readers they stood on the brink of great 'craze', we hear Hoover's fears of 'frantic chaos' though the phrase gains a more general application than point-to-point communications:

In America this boom has become so widespread that Federal Legislation is to be hastily invoked to reduce to order the 'frantic chaos'... The broadcasting companies [in the US], whose aim is, of course, the sale of these sets, send out an amazing variety of musical, entertaining and educational matter, besides a mass of 'advertising chatter' while in addition there is an intense exchange of telephonic messages between amateurs. The result is naturally confusion, congestion, mutual interference, and 'jamming'.³⁸

Note also here the morphing of Hoover's original phrase that it is 'inconceivable' that the ether should be used for 'advertising chatter' to there being already a 'mass of "advertising chatter"'.³⁸

Of course, every big retail house would like to shout the merits and low prices of its taffetas and tulles, its shirts and shoes. There is no room for this.³⁹

Norman's colourful turn of phrase is oft-quoted in early radio histories, but it needs to be read carefully; he was talking about advertising in the context of who would be granted licences.⁴⁰ It is unlikely that Norman had actually heard any broadcasting in the US, still less any 'big retail house' advertising its wares. It is possible Norman's, and Brown's before him, fixation on radio advertising reflected male anxieties about the growing influence of department stores, such as Selfridges, aimed largely at women, though this was never explicitly stated. Whatever the motivation, Norman's article cleared the way for a small number of wireless manufacturers to be favoured over other potential applicants in the award of transmitter licences. He explicitly linked advertising, dismissed as 'chatter' about clothing, to interference in the United States. As for who would pay for broadcasting, 'since the organization and cost – no trifling matter – will be with the commercial object of selling receiving apparatus, the answer is obvious': the manufacturers.⁴¹

As we have seen, British officials and their parliamentary supporters, either purposely or inadvertently, misrepresented what was happening to broadcasting in the US, in order to support a particular approach to policy. Hoover's remarks about the potential problems with unregulated radio telephony were misconstrued as applying to broadcasting. Historians have taken Brown and Norman's arguments about 'American chaos' at face value, rather than exploring how they misrepresented the US scene for particular purposes.

IV: Marconi proposes

The 39 members of the wireless trade invited to the GPO's headquarters near St Pauls in London, on 18 May 1922 were keenly aware that the future of a new industry rested on their shoulders and that failure might mean, as one participant noted, this 'whole delightful enterprise which fascinates everybody and which promises good business, will end in a fizzle and disappointment'.⁴² This meeting is one of the most significant events in the history of British broadcasting. It took place behind closed doors. Murray requested no comment be made to the press, beyond the official communiqué. Historians have until now been able to study the Post Office's summary report, and verbal evidence presented to the Sykes Committee, but not what was actually said by participants. Indeed, there is a note in the BBC Written Archives Centre in Caversham stating there is 'no account of the Conference held at the Post Office on 18th May, 1922'.⁴³ However, a 'transcript from the shorthand notes of George Leslie Bannerman' has appeared in the Royal Mail Archives among a recently catalogued collection of documents on broadcasting.⁴⁴ Although the meeting was chaired by Sir Evelyn Murray, the Secretary of the Post Office, it is Godfrey Isaacs, the managing director of Marconi, who emerges from the pages of this transcript as the dominant force in the room. At Isaacs' suggestion, twenty companies indicated at the outset 'a desire to have licences'. With broadcasting to be allowed in only eight cities, the challenges were evident during a lengthy discussion regarding mutual interference, transmitter power and how slots might be divided between the different broadcasting companies (with their times registered at the Post Office).

That the Post Office was prepared to issue multiple licences is evidenced by a suggestion from Brown that London could be served by four stations on the outskirts with the Marconi station, presumably 2LO, in the centre. Eventually, Isaacs drew their attention to the 'commercial aspects of this question, which may possibly lead to a much easier solution of the technical side'. He suggested after the initial outlay it will cost not less than £50 per day to run each station.

As long as we are doing a very big business in selling the receivers, it may be that we can well afford to pay the £50 per day; but there must come a time sooner or later when the demand is satiated.

He then proposed that broadcasting stations be

run under one management so that they may be properly coordinated, so that there may not be more stations than are necessary, and so that they may be most economically and efficiently worked. I think that the most satisfactory way of doing that would be to create a separate entity in which all who have licences shall be interested, that should run the stations and that should appoint the management of those stations.⁴⁵

Isaacs further suggested that firms taking part should commit to the scheme for a period of two or three years. Welcoming the proposal, Murray indicated the arms-length approach the Post Office intended to adopt: 'I do not commit myself to detail and I do not know that it is our business to concern ourselves with those details'.⁴⁶ He would later turn down Isaacs' offer of a Post Office seat on the board.

The advantages for Marconi's competitors were clear and in the next few exchanges the foundations of British broadcasting were laid. Hugo Hirst, the Chairman of General Electric, said he would have made a similar suggestion 'merely from the business man's point of view' and noted

if the ideals of the Postmaster-General are to be carried out, a good service should be given to the public, and a good fillip be given to the industry, it depends on co-ordinated public service in transmission.⁴⁷

Hirst went on to suggest that the Post Office might like to use some of the proceeds from the 10 shilling licence charged for wireless receiving sets to fund 'a programme, so as to be sure that the service can be continued? It is only an idea which I threw [*sic*] out'.⁴⁸ Having already ruled out advertising income, Murray found himself on weak ground and without further encouragement, Isaacs offered to develop a proposal for licence-fee income.⁴⁹ An unnamed representative from Liverpool suggested London and regional stations share content via Post Office trunk wires: 'there is no reason that I can see why Great Britain should not in one evening be listening to the very best the country could produce...'⁵⁰

Only Metropolitan Vickers, the Manchester-based company formed out of British Westinghouse and still associated with its American former owner, resisted the idea of a single provider and called for competition to maintain 'the best type of programme, the best type of music', otherwise standards might slip after a time.⁵¹ Isaacs made clear that he didn't believe a 'transmitting station can be erected to work efficiently' without using Marconi patented technology, which he would only make available to a single scheme.⁵²

Murray invited the parties to work up a scheme for one, or 'if necessary', two broadcasters. He repeated the ban on advertising without inviting discussion, but invited views as to what extent the firms contemplated the broadcasting of news, noting that the press and news agencies were 'putting it at its lowest extremely nervous'.⁵³ Here Murray was forcefully challenged to face down the press. The manufacturers noted they were arguing for a monopoly on information which could 'throttle' the new industry; suppose the Prime Minister wanted to speak to the nation at a General Election, asked one.⁵⁴ Murray told the meeting that the Post Office proposed to abolish the need to supply references and a birth certificate to obtain a receiving licence, signalling that he was envisaging mass uptake of wireless receivers.⁵⁵ He also indicated that he had no intention of banning foreign devices. In early June, the Postmaster General would relent, offering two years' protection, with Metropolitan-Vickers falling into line behind a single scheme a week later. But the Postmaster General did impose restrictions on news. The BBC's first operating licence allowed the new broadcaster to broadcast only news or 'information in the nature of news' that they had first purchased from one or more of four named news agencies, including Reuters and the Press Association.⁵⁶

The transcript of the May 1922 meeting requires us to reconsider established historiographical wisdom and confront the paradox that the foundations for public sector broadcasting were laid by businessmen whose primary interest lay in selling radios. Maurice Gorham, drawing heavily on Coase, states

the idea that monopoly was desirable for the sake of programme standards was a later importation. There is no evidence that it occurred to anybody during the tangled negotiations of 1922.⁵⁷

Gorham is wrong here. A single entity was proposed as a means of maintaining programme standards, particularly when income tailed off from the sale of receiving sets. Quality, as well as durability, appears to have been uppermost in the minds of these men. Hilmes has noted that in the subsequent discussions between the broadcasters over the summer 'nowhere ... does the idea of broadcasting as a mission of public uplift and education appear'.⁵⁸ The 18 May meeting has, though, established the context for these discussions: a quality programme serving the public, indeed 'the very best the country could produce'.⁵⁹ The manufacturers' aspirations for the new service exceed those of the civil servants and by challenging restrictions on news foreshadow the role that broadcasting would play in the new democracy. David Hendy is right in seeking to remove Guglielmo Marconi, a man who spent the first two decades of the century trying to establish a monopoly for private messaging, from 'any narrative account of the origins of public service broadcasting'.⁶⁰ It is ironic, therefore, that Marconi's representative in the room that day should have had such profound influence on the development of public service broadcasting in Britain.

The transcript of the 18 May meeting was not provided to the Sykes Committee a year later, and it is not clear whether Brown read it before giving evidence. If he did, he misled the committee. Explaining the establishment of the BBC, Brown said:

The main question was, how the finance of the thing was to be arranged. In America, as I have said, the broadcasting stations were put up primarily with the object of ensuring the sale of receiving sets, but nobody here was prepared to go on on that basis: at all events as far as I am aware no manufacturer or anybody else, was prepared to go on on that basis.⁶¹

Twenty firms at the meeting had indicated they wanted licences. In fact, the early discussion was devoted to how they might operate multiple stations. The question, raised initially by

Isaacs, was whether they would sustain services once sales of receiving sets began to drop off. Brown went on to tell Sykes:

I do not quite know where the suggestion first came from, the papers do not show definitely, but, at all events, the suggestion was made that part of our licence fees for receiving sets should go to the Company or Combination that might be formed to help to pay for the cost.⁶²

We now know this suggestion was 'thrown out' by Hugo Hirst of General Electric.⁶³

The manufacturers chose not to challenge the Post Office on the question of advertising. A week later, on 25 May, the six largest companies met at the Institution of Electrical Engineers.⁶⁴ A copy of the agenda survives. It is marked up, most likely by Frank Gill, chief engineer of Western Electric and that year's President of the Institution, who took the chair. Next to the item 'Organisation of Broadcasting Co.', written in hand are the words 'British Broadcasting Co.' which appears to be the earliest use of this name. In the section on finance, next to policy 'as to advertising', are written the words 'Leave alone for present'.⁶⁵ The minutes suggest this was the last moment the issue was considered before the formation of the BBC. The principle that the new broadcaster should not sell its airtime would be written into the BBC's licence and ultimately become a central pillar of its public service remit.

V: Conclusion

John Reith would not be interviewed for the role of General Manager until December 1922, starting work just after Christmas. Reith built the BBC but did so on three solid foundations: monopoly status, a board with an independent chairman (originally to avoid Marconi dominance, but useful when asserting the BBC's independence from government) and the principle of listener licence fee funding. Listeners were initially required to buy BBC-marked sets made by the participating firms or purchase a 10 shilling experimenters' licence (of which the BBC received half) and build their own set from scratch, but this scheme soon broke down to be replaced within a few years by a 10 shilling licence for all, with the BBC receiving a proportion on a sliding scale.⁶⁶ The Post Office retained ultimate control of the spectrum;

indeed the BBC's eventual operating licence would require the broadcaster to provide a service 'to the satisfaction of the Postmaster General'. But Murray did not want to be troubled with editorial or programming decisions. According to Briggs 'concerts... were not in his line'.⁶⁷ A more interventionist Secretary of the Post Office might well have been attracted by the idea of a government-run station. This would have been a very different BBC, far more akin to the future state broadcasters of Europe and it would have faced competition from the outset.

The politicians were offered limited options in the spring of 1922. Brown's statement to *The Times* in April 1922 and internal briefing papers make selective use of Hoover's words to close down alternative futures – not least toll broadcasting as a funding mechanism.⁶⁸ Indeed Hoover's negative comments about 'direct' advertising had far greater impact in Britain than they did in the United States; where congressional attempts at serious regulation were doomed to fail until 1927. British politicians and the public were fed exaggerated fears of 'chaos' on American airwaves in the spring of 1922 in order to restrict transmitter licences to *bona fide* manufacturers, to the exclusion of other potential applicants. Even so, the Post Office entered the 18 May 1922 meeting prepared to licence several manufacturers. What emerged was a single broadcaster operating at arms-length from the Post Office providing a 'public service' with national content shared between regional stations, funded by a licence fee with advertising prohibited. We can identify the exact moment the BBC was conceived. It was not the Post Office that proposed the BBC, but Godfrey Isaacs of Marconi.

NOTES

¹ Seaton, "Reith and the Denial of Politics", 104. See also for instance Coase, *British Broadcasting*, 23; Boyle, *Only The Wind Will Listen*, 124-5; Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 58-59.

² "Wireless Telephony Broadcasting Conference 1922: Verbatim Report"

³ Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 85

⁴ Jacot and Collier, *Marconi*, 123

-
- ⁵ Brown, "Story of Broadcasting in England", 175
- ⁶ "Evidence of F J Brown", Sykes Committee, 46; Hilmes, "British Quality, American Chaos", 15
- ⁷ Bensman, *The Beginning of Broadcast Regulation*, 46
- ⁸ Barnouw, *A Tower of Babel*, 94-95; Bensman, *The Beginning of Broadcast Regulation*, 9
- ⁹ *Radio Telephone Broadcasting*
- ¹⁰ Phipps, "Order Out of Chaos", 70
- ¹¹ Seaton, "Reith and the Denial of Politics", 107
- ¹² Briggs and Peter, *A Social History of the Media*, 154
- ¹³ "June 30, 1922 Broadcast Station List"
- ¹⁴ Bensman, *The Beginning of Broadcast Regulation*, 40
- ¹⁵ Whitney, "One Commercial Side of Radio", 36
- ¹⁶ Editorial, "Radio Currents.", *Radio Broadcast*, 1:1 (May 1922)
- ¹⁷ Banning, *Commercial Broadcasting Pioneer*, 77
- ¹⁸ "The March of Radio", 457
- ¹⁹ Whitney, "One Commercial Side of Radio", 36
- ²⁰ Banning, *Commercial Broadcasting Pioneer*, 67-69; White, "Financing Radio Broadcasting"
- ²¹ Banning, *Commercial Broadcasting Pioneer*, 109. This section states the broadcasts started in March 1923. A separate chronology gives the date as 24 February 1923, xxx
- ²² "Air Advertising Can't Be Sold Now: The Time is not Ripe for Air Advertising", *The Radio Dealer*, 1:1 (April 1922), 30
- ²³ Barnouw, *A Tower of Babel*, 96
- ²⁴ "Report of Department of Commerce Conference on Radio Telephony." *Radio Service Bulletin*, 1 May 1922. Note I.4
- ²⁵ Ibid., Clause III.D
- ²⁶ Ibid., Clause III.E

-
- ²⁷ "Petition to the Rt. Hon. F.G. Kellaway, MP."
- ²⁸ "Cessation of Writtle Wireless Concerts"
- ²⁹ Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 68
- ³⁰ "Evidence of F J Brown", Sykes Committee, 37
- ³¹ Coase, *British Broadcasting*, 12, 25
- ³² Brown, "The Story of Broadcasting in England", 175-176
- ³³ Hansard, Vol. 152, Col. 1869, 3 Apr. 1922 cited in Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 63
- ³⁴ "Wireless Telephone News: Extension Plans Being Considered." *The Times*, Apr 7 1922), 17
- ³⁵ "Historical summary and résumé of events", 1; See also Briggs, *The Birth of British Broadcasting*, 88-90
- ³⁶ Clarke, *My Northcliffe Diary*, 274.
- ³⁷ "Summary of statement by Mr. Kellaway, Postmaster General in House of Commons today in regard to broadcasting stations", 4 May 1922 (BBC WAC, CO1/2)
- ³⁸ Norman, Henry. 1922. "Wireless for All: Part One", *The Times*, May 8, 17
- ³⁹ Ibid., 17
- ⁴⁰ Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 94; Briggs, *The BBC*, 28; Hilmes, *Network Nations*, 40
- ⁴¹ Norman, "Wireless for All", *The Times*, 17
- ⁴² "Wireless Telephony Broadcasting Conference 1922: Verbatim Report", 14. There has been some confusion over the number of companies attending. There are 28 attendees from 18 companies and a further 11 with no company affiliation listed.
- ⁴³ Covering Note re: Letter from GPO, 15 May 1922, (BBC WAC, CO1/2); Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 106. Briggs describes this 'important meeting' but without identifying who makes the contributions. He cites a 'summary report of this meeting in the Post Office Archives, 22,310/25.
- ⁴⁴ "Wireless Telephony Broadcasting Conference 1922: Verbatim Report", 2; The British Postal Museum and Archive blog, 'The Post Office and British Broadcasting', 2009, <<https://postalheritage.wordpress.com/2009/09/29/the-post-office-and-british-broadcasting/>>, accessed August 14, 2018
- ⁴⁵ "Wireless Telephony Broadcasting Conference 1922: Verbatim Report", 10-11

⁴⁶ Ibid., 13

⁴⁷ Ibid., 13

⁴⁸ Ibid., 14

⁴⁹ Ibid., 27

⁵⁰ Ibid., 17

⁵¹ Ibid., 15

⁵² Ibid., 18

⁵³ Ibid., 19

⁵⁴ Ibid., 20-23

⁵⁵ Ibid., 27

⁵⁶ *Wireless Broadcasting Licence*, cl.2c

⁵⁷ Gorham, *Broadcasting and Television*, 27-28

⁵⁸ Hilmes, *Network Nations*, 40

⁵⁹ "Wireless Telephony Broadcasting Conference 1922: Verbatim Report", 17

⁶⁰ David Hendy, *Public Service Broadcasting*, 8

⁶¹ "Evidence of F J Brown", Sykes Committee, 38-39

⁶² "Evidence of F J Brown", Sykes Committee, 39

⁶³ The same suggestion had in fact been made a few weeks earlier in a letter to *The Times* on 25 April 1922, by a Mr. H.H. Brown of Whorlton, Barnard Castle. The Post Office 'rather than place one firm in a privileged position, they should raise the annual charge for a "receiving" licence sufficiently to defray the costs of a "broadcasting" station'.

⁶⁴ Reith, *Broadcast over Britain*, 58

⁶⁵ "Agenda For 25 May 1922"

⁶⁶ "Wireless Receiving Licenses"

⁶⁷ Briggs, *The BBC*, 26

⁶⁸ "Radio Telephone Broadcasting"; "Wireless Telephone News: Extension Plans Being Considered", 17

BIBLIOGRAPHY

"Agenda For 25 May 1922." (BBC Written Archives Centre, CO1/1/1)

Banning, William Peck. *Commercial Broadcasting Pioneer: The WEA Experiment, 1922-1926*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1946

Barnouw, Erik. *A History of Broadcasting in the United States: Volume 1: A Tower of Babel*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1966

Bensman, Marvin. *The Beginning of Broadcast Regulation in the Twentieth Century*, Jefferson, NC.: McFarland & Co., 2000

Boyle, Andrew. *Only The Wind Will Listen: Reith of the BBC*. London: Hutchinson, 1972

Briggs, Asa. *The BBC: The First Fifty Years*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985

Briggs, Asa. *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom: Volume 1: The Birth of Broadcasting*. London: Oxford University Press, 1961 (reprinted 2000)

Briggs, Asa and Burke, Peter. *A Social History of the Media: From Gutenberg to the Internet*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009

Brown, F.J. "The Story of Broadcasting in England." *Radio Broadcast*, 7, no. 2 (June 1925)

"Cessation of Writtle Wireless Concerts", 1923 (Marconi Archives, MS312)

Clarke, Tom. *My Northcliffe Diary*, London: Gollancz, 1931

Coase, R.H. *British Broadcasting: A Study in Monopoly*. London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1950

"Evidence of F J Brown, Sykes Committee Minutes of the 2nd Meeting." 2 May 1923 (BBC WAC, R4/ 64/1)

Gorham, Maurice. *Broadcasting and Television since 1900*. London: Dakers, 1952

Hendy, David, *Public Service Broadcasting*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013

Hilmes, Michele. "British Quality, American Chaos: Historical Dualisms and What They Leave Out." *Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast and Audio Media*, 1, no. 1 (2003), 13-27. doi: 10.1386/rajo.1.1.13/0

Hilmes, Michele. *Network Nations: A Transnational History of British and American Broadcasting*. New York: Routledge, 2012

"Wireless Receiving Licenses", 1925? (BBC WAC, CO58/1)

"Historical summary and résumé of events leading to appointment of committee", 28 Apr 1923 (BBC WAC, R4/65/1)

Jacot, B.L. and Collier, D.M.B. *Marconi: Master of Space: An Authorized Biography of the Marchese Marconi*. London: Hutchinson, 1935

"June 30, 1922 Broadcast Station List", *United States Early Radio History*, <<http://earlyradiohistory.us/220630ci.htm>>, accessed 6 October 2016

"Petition to the Rt. Hon. F.G. Kellaway, MP. Postmaster-General from the Amateur Radiotelegraphists of Great Britain." December 1921 (Marconi Archives, MS 1799)

Phipps, Steven. "'Order Out of Chaos: A Reexamination of the Historical Basis for the Scarcity of Channels Concept", *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 45, no. 1 (2001), 57-74. doi: 10.1207/s15506878jobem4501_5

"Radio Telephone Broadcasting." 24 May 1922. (Royal Mail Archives, POST 89)

Reith, J.C.W. *Broadcast over Britain*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1924

Seaton, Jean. "Reith and the Denial of Politics" in Curran, James and Seaton, Jean (eds.), *Power Without Responsibility: Press, broadcasting and the internet in Britain*, London: Routledge, 2010

"The March of Radio: The Dangers in Unreliable Broadcast Lectures." *Radio Broadcast*, 1:6 (October 1922)

White, Thomas. "Financing Radio Broadcasting, 1898-1927", *United States Early Radio History*. Accessed 6 October 2016. <http://earlyradiohistory.us/sec020.htm>

Whitney, Parkhurst. "One Commercial Side of Radio", *Radio Broadcast*, 1, no. 1 (May 1922)

Wireless Broadcasting Licence, Cmd. 1822. London: HM Stationery Office, 1923

"Wireless Telephony Broadcasting Conference 1922: Verbatim Report." (Royal Mail Archives, POST 89/1)